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PATTERN OF CONFERENCES

Control and limitation of documentation: implementation of General Assembly resolution 50/206

Report of the Secretary-General

I. INTRODUCTION

1. In paragraph 11 of its resolution 50/206 C of 23 December 1995, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to present to it at its fifty-first session, through the Committee on Conferences and the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions, a report on the implementation of the measures called for under the resolution, including information on possible savings.

2. Moreover, in paragraph 3 of its resolution 50/206 B of the same date, the General Assembly took note of the intention of the Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space to replace its verbatim records by unedited transcripts, and requested the Committee to keep the Assembly informed, through the Committee on Conferences, of the experience of that body regarding unedited transcripts. In addition, in paragraph 4, it took note of the decision of the Committee on Conferences, contained in paragraph 75 of its report to the Assembly, 1/ to request its Chairman to write to the chairmen of other bodies, drawing their attention to the potential economies of making more general use of unedited transcripts in place of more labour-intensive summary or verbatim records and to review their own requirements in that light, pending further information from the Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space on its experience with unedited verbatim transcripts. It also requested the Committee on Conferences to report on the implementation of that decision to the Assembly at its fifty-first session.

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3. Furthermore, in paragraph 3 of its resolution 50/206 D of 23 December 1995, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to present proposals to the Assembly at its fifty-first session through the Committee on Conferences on facilitating access to the optical disk system in all official languages by developing countries, taking into account the possible savings from reduced copying and distribution costs.

4. The purpose of the present report is to meet the aforementioned requests of the General Assembly.

II. PAGE LIMITS

5. In paragraph 2 of its resolution 50/206 C of 23 December 1995, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to enforce, where appropriate, the existing page limits in respect of all documents originating in the Secretariat, to review those limits, where appropriate, with a view to achieving an overall reduction of documentation without affecting its quality and to report thereon to the General Assembly at its fifty-first session through the Committee on Conferences.

6. In order to provide as comprehensive a picture as possible of the degree of compliance with the existing page limits, statistical information has been compiled on the number and length of the documents issued in 1995 for the General Assembly, the Security Council and the Economic and Social Council.

7. The data refer to documents issued strictly under the symbols of those three principal organs (A/, S/ and E/). Owing to time and other constraints, documents issued under the symbols of subsidiary bodies of those organs, including their main and sessional committees, are excluded. Meeting records, official records, resolutions, information documents (lists of participants, for example) and corrigenda are also excluded. The information provided in the table below, however, is quite comprehensive. It covers 63 per cent of the 1995 Headquarters translation workload and between 25 and 30 per cent of the 1995 hard-copy output at Headquarters, estimated on the basis of a comparison between the total number of documents and of pages indicated in the table and the total number of individual jobs and of original pages printed by the internal reproduction facilities.

8. The documents have been categorized as follows:

(a) Category A: reports originating in the Secretariat;

(b) Category B: reports not originating in the Secretariat. This group includes reports of subsidiary organs and of special rapporteurs, reports in which replies from Governments are compiled and other documents whose length, in a strict sense, cannot be controlled by the Secretariat, for example, agendas (including the annotated preliminary list of items of the General Assembly), notes transmitting biographical information on candidates for elections, programmes of work and similar documents. This group also includes major policy documents, such as the report of the Secretary-General on the work of the

Documents issued at Headquarters in 1995 for the General Assembly, the Security Council and the Economic and Social Council

Category		Length of documents: 1-24 pages	25-32 pages	33-50 pages	51-100 pages	100+ pages	Total
A	Documents	350	31	26	13	1	421
	Pages	2 926	929	1 101	836	101	5 893
B	Documents	481	33	60	37	22	633
	Pages	3 162	939	2 456	2 478	4 455	13 490
C	Documents	870	2	1	3	5	881
	Pages	2 777	54	33	174	953	3 991
D	Documents	218					218
	Pages	531					531
Total	Documents	1 919	66	87	53	28	2 153
	Pages	9 396	1 922	3 590	3 488	5 509	23 905

Organization, the proposed programme budget and, for the Economic and Social Council, the World Economic and Social Survey;

(c) Category C: communications from Member States;

(d) Category D: draft resolutions and draft decisions.

The table shows that 20 per cent of the documents analysed are subject to control by the Secretariat and that, among those, 83 per cent comply with the existing limit of 24 pages, with an average length of 8.4 pages. In 1995, however, a total of 71 documents exceeded that limit (60 were issued for the General Assembly, 10 for the Economic and Social Council and 1 for the Security Council). Their combined length amounted to 2,967 pages and their average length was 42 pages. If those 71 documents had all been 24 pages long, their combined length would have been 1,704 pages and the volume of documentation would have been about 1,200 pages, or 5 per cent, lower.

9. The following information provides a breakdown by subject-matter of the reports originating in the Secretariat that exceeded the limit of 24 pages:

	Documents	Pages
Economic questions	24	969
Financing of peace-keeping operations	17	860
Political and humanitarian questions	10	392
Social questions	10	315
Legal questions	4	210
Human rights questions	3	116
Administrative and budgetary questions	3	105
Total	71	2 967

10. in accordance with existing administrative instructions (ST/AI/189/Add.20/Rev.1), the 24-page limit can be waived only in particular cases where the complexity of the subject or the abundance of detail so warrant and if the heads of the author departments concerned provide written justification for the need to exceed the limit.

11. The Secretariat will continue to endeavour to provide the documentation requested by intergovernmental bodies within the established page limits. Guidance from those bodies concerning all possibilities of reducing the volume of documentation further will also contribute to a more consistent enforcement of those limits.

12. The General Assembly and the Committee on Conferences may wish to indicate whether information similar to that provided in the present document should in future be submitted for consideration to the Assembly and the Committee.

III. FORMAT OF REPORTS

13. In subparagraph 9 (b) of its resolution 50/206 C, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to seek a more reader-friendly and uniform format of reports, taking into account new publishing technologies, that would include sections containing the objective of the report, an executive summary, the conclusions drawn and, as appropriate, the action proposed to be taken by the body, and to submit proposals thereon to the General Assembly through the Committee on Conferences.

14. The request of the General Assembly refers both to the structure of the contents and to the format of documentation. The desirable structure for reports, as set forth in the above-mentioned resolution, has been used extensively in the past and is becoming ever more common in reports prepared by the Secretariat. This is particularly evident in the use of executive summaries. Up to a few years ago, only documents prepared for the Economic and Social Council routinely included a front-page summary, pursuant to a request of

the Council in its resolution 1988/77. The practice has been extended to many different types of documents, including reports on budgetary issues.

15. However, much wider structural variations are found among the reports that intergovernmental bodies prepare on their activities. These variations have persisted in spite of the appeals to contain the length of reports and the specific suggestions on their desirable structure that the General Assembly has issued repeatedly to subsidiary organs since at least 1982 (for example, resolutions 37/14 C of 16 November 1982, 43/222 C of 21 December 1988, 45/238 B of 21 December 1990 and 47/202 B of 22 December 1992).

16. In the majority of cases, this situation is a reflection of the nature of the respective fields of work of the various bodies. A body entrusted with the elaboration of legal principles, for example, must necessarily cover in considerable detail the differing opinions voiced during debates, and may for that reason refrain from attempting to summarize information. A subsidiary body recommending the adoption of decisions by its parent body must highlight the action proposed and can afford to summarize or eliminate other elements. Structural variations also result from the degree to which the reports can make reference to supporting documentation, for example meeting records, in the case of bodies entitled to receive them, or must include information that would not otherwise be available elsewhere.

17. Considerable progress has been made in the improvement of the format of documentation in all languages and, at the same time, in achieving economies by eliminating almost entirely the use of external typesetting and reducing the use of paper. This has been made possible by the installation of advanced word-processing equipment and desktop publishing equipment, respectively, in the text-processing and copy preparation units of Conference Services.

18. Up to the present time, efforts have been focused on the in-house word-processing or desktop publishing of texts that were previously typeset externally. In the field of parliamentary documentation, relevant examples are the volumes of resolutions of the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council and the Security Council, the final "Official Records" version of the proposed programme budget, the quarterly supplements to the Official Records of the Security Council and the verbatim records of the General Assembly and the Security Council.

19. The substitution of external processing of documentation in all languages by internal processing has produced savings that can be estimated roughly at well over $1 million per biennium in external typesetting costs. (In this connection, see the first report of the Advisory Committee on Administrative and Budgetary Questions on the proposed programme budget for 1996-1997.) 2/ This has been achieved with additional, concomitant economies in internal staff costs, during a period when the number of text-processing staff has been progressively reduced. The new processing methods, furthermore, have reduced the need to have particular documents "reworked" by different units, streamlining the process and making documents available in final, easy-to-read and less bulky formats in a much more timely manner.

20. Beyond parliamentary documentation, the internal text-processing and desktop publishing capacity of Conference Services is also being used extensively by several Secretariat units, mainly the Department of Public Information, for the production of publications and information materials with high-quality presentation features without incurring external costs.

21. The next stage in the process of improvement of formats will concentrate on the use in all languages of new layouts in documents currently issued in simple text-processing format (the format of the present document). The possibilities offered by the combined use of different type styles and type sizes and by the use of double-column layouts will be tapped with the overall objectives of enhancing readability and reducing paper consumption, with a view to making further economies in supplies and transportation and storage costs, beyond those already achieved through reductions in print runs.

22. Positive results have already been attained in this field, as exemplified by the fascicles of the proposed programme budget, the annotated preliminary list of items of the General Assembly, the report of the Secretary-General on the work of the Organization, the report of the Secretary-General on the activities of the Office of Internal Oversight Services and the reports of the Secretary-General containing budgets and performance reports of peace-keeping operations.

23. Upgraded equipment and software more efficient for the production of new formats than those currently used will become available in the text-processing units in the course of the next 12 months. In the Chinese Unit, the existing Great Wall word-processing system will be replaced by the Chinese version of Microsoft Word 6.0 for Windows, together with the Chinese Star software and the five-stroke input system for Windows. WordPerfect 5.1 will be replaced by WordPerfect 6.1 for Windows in the English, French and Spanish units. Appropriate new software now being identified will also be installed in the Arabic and Russian units. Staff training will be coordinated with the installation of the new software.

24. The use of new document formats will become more extended in all languages as the availability of resources makes it possible to proceed with equipment upgrading, software installation and staff training. Realizing the potential for increased efficiency and savings offered by the new formats will initially require additional work at the text-processing stage, until the staff is fully trained in the new work methods and the new formats are fully standardized. In any event, this objective will have to be pursued while preserving the current capacity of the text-processing units to ensure the timely issuance of documentation in all languages simultaneously, working with generally very short deadlines and operating within the present framework of reduced staff resources and drastic limitations in the use of overtime.

25. The Committee on Conferences and the General Assembly may wish to endorse the approach outlined in the preceding paragraphs.

IV. IMPLEMENTATION OF RESOLUTION 50/206 C

26. As stated in paragraph 1 above, paragraph 11 of General Assembly resolution 50/206 C contains a request addressed to the Secretary-General for a report on the implementation of the provisions of the resolution, some of which required action by intergovernmental bodies while others had to be implemented by the Secretariat.

27. In the preceding sections of the present document, information has been provided on activities undertaken by the Secretariat. This section covers action required of intergovernmental bodies in response to paragraphs 6, 7 and 8 of resolution 50/206 C, which were addressed to them and which recommended restraint in requesting new reports; consideration of the possibility of biennializing or triennializing the presentation of documents; review of the need for recurrent documents; and consideration of the possibility of requesting oral reports and consolidated reports.

28. Every month, the Director of Conference Services has addressed memoranda to the secretaries of all intergovernmental bodies meeting in New York in the following month requesting them to bring the provisions of paragraphs 6, 7 and 8 to the attention of the bodies concerned, and to transmit any information that might become available concerning action taken by those bodies in connection with resolution 50/206 C.

29. Responses received indicate that bodies have been made aware of the provisions of resolution 50/206 C on control of documentation. In two cases, this has led to positive action. The Committee on Natural Resources has decided to eliminate from its report to the Economic and Social Council summaries covering the general debate and other statements. Also, the Committee has reduced the number of resolutions recommended for adoption by the Council from over 10 in previous sessions to only 2 at its last session. For its next session, it is requesting only 5 reports from the Secretariat, instead of 8 in the past session, and it is reducing its duration to 8 days, down from 10. The Committee on Relations with the Host Country has decided that its next report to the General Assembly should be shorter than previous ones, without affecting the substance of the topics covered.

30. The United Nations Commission on International Trade Law (UNCITRAL) took note of General Assembly resolution 50/206 C and considered the requests and suggestions contained in paragraphs 6 to 8. While recognizing the need for achieving further savings in the field of documentation, the Commission concluded that, beyond the restraint it had been exercising for some time already, no additional measures of the kind suggested could be taken without adversely affecting the fulfilment of its mandate.

31. Information on action taken by other bodies that is received after the issuance of the present report will be transmitted to the General Assembly in an addendum.

V. UNEDITED TRANSCRIPTS

32. As stated in paragraph 2 above, in paragraph 3 of its resolution 50/206 B of 23 December 1995, the General Assembly took note of the intention of the Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space to replace its verbatim records by unedited transcripts, and requested the Committee to keep the Assembly informed, through the Committee on Conferences, of the experience of that body regarding unedited transcripts. In addition, in paragraph 4 of the resolution, it took note of the decision of the Committee on Conferences, contained in paragraph 75 of its report to the Assembly, to request its Chairman to write to the chairmen of other bodies, drawing their attention to the potential economies of making more general use of unedited transcripts in place of more labour-intensive summary or verbatim records and to review their own requirements in that light, pending further information from the Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space on its experience with unedited verbatim transcripts. The General Assembly also requested the Committee on Conferences to report on the implementation of that decision to the Assembly at its fifty-first session.

33. In accordance with the agreement it reached at its session of 1995, and pursuant to its recommendation, which was endorsed by the General Assembly in paragraph 11 of its resolution 50/27 of 6 December 1995, the Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space was provided with unedited transcripts of its session of 1996 in lieu of verbatim records.

34. Moreover, pursuant to the request of the General Assembly in paragraph 12 of the aforementioned resolution, the Legal Subcommittee of the Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space reviewed its requirement for summary records, and the Committee endorsed the recommendation of the Legal Subcommittee that beginning with its thirty-sixth session, in 1997, the Legal Subcommittee should also be provided with unedited transcripts in lieu of summary records.

35. A review of the transcripts by the secretariat of the Committee has shown that their quality is extremely high. In the view of the Secretariat, which is shared by the Chairman of the Committee, considering the savings involved, there seems to be no reason to revert to the former edited verbatim records.

36. It should be noted that once the transcripts are distributed, the members of the Committee will have the opportunity to submit corrections, as necessary, which will be issued in a consolidated corrigendum. This practice, inter alia, will enable the Secretariat to assess the quality of the transcripts. In addition the Office for Outer Space Affairs, together with the Translation and Editorial Service at Vienna, is developing a set of guidelines to assist in preparing the record so that the transcripts in all languages have the same format and high quality.

37. While the Committee will undertake a formal review of the use of unedited transcripts during its session of 1997, many delegations welcomed the substantial savings anticipated as a result of the change. The Committee will continue to keep the General Assembly informed, through the Committee on Conferences, of its experience regarding unedited transcripts.

VI. ACCESS TO THE OPTICAL DISK SYSTEM

38. As sated in paragraph 3 above, in paragraph 3 of its resolution 50/206 D of 23 December 1995, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to present proposals to the Assembly at its fifty-first session through the Committee on Conferences on facilitating access by developing countries to the optical disk system in all official languages, taking into account the possible savings from reduced copying and distribution costs.

39. This issue is being addressed by the Secretariat in the context of the implementation of Economic and Social Council resolution 1995/61, which focuses on the more general question of providing delegations and Member States with electronic access to different kinds of data generated by the United Nations and its specialized agencies. In accordance with paragraph 6 of that resolution, a report on its implementation was submitted to the Economic and Social Council at its substantive session of 1996. 3/ The information concerning the optical disk system contained in that report is summarized briefly in the present document.

40. The Working Group established under Economic and Social Council resolution 1995/61 was unanimous in its position that the future development of information services to Member States should focus on the use of Internet technology and emphasized the need for Member States to have all official documents available via the Internet.

41. With a view to achieving this objective, an accelerated programme has been undertaken in New York by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to provide Internet connectivity to all permanent and observer missions in New York that request this service. Similar arrangements are being provided by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) for missions in Geneva. As at June 1996, a total of 93 permanent missions in New York were connected to the Internet via the UNDP dial-in service. It is foreseen that 50 additional missions will be connected by the end of 1996 and that connections for all remaining missions will be in place by the end of 1997. Missions, at their request, are also being provided with training services on the use of the Internet arranged by the Secretariat for their staff.

42. In accordance with the general methodology for the electronic dissemination of documentation through the Internet advocated by the Working Group of the Economic and Social Council as summarized in the preceding paragraphs, the Office of Conference and Support Services of the Secretariat is in the process of linking the optical disk system to the United Nations Web server. When the link is in place at the end of 1996, all documents in the system will be available to Member States on the Internet in all languages. In order to ensure that Member States have unimpeded access to the optical disk system through the Internet, service will be provided initially to permanent and observer missions, and will be extended subsequently to government offices in capitals. In later phases, service may be extended to other users, including the public at large.

43. In addition to the link through the Internet that will be established in the near future, direct connections to the optical disk system are and will remain available. They can be established from any location where integrated service digital network telephone lines are available. Training on information

retrieval and downloading from the system is provided free of charge by the Dag Hammarskjöld Library. As at mid-July 1996, 34 missions in New York, 31 missions at Geneva and government offices in two national capitals have established direct connections to the system.

44. On 25 July 1996, the Economic and Social Council adopted resolution 1996/36, in which it noted with interest the updating of the connection between the United Nations Internet facility and the optical disk system; took note of the report referred to in paragraph 39 above; 3/ requested its President to convene the Working Group for one more year; and requested the Secretary-General to give priority to implementing the Working Group's recommendations.

45. Considering the role being played and the guidance being provided by the Economic and Social Council and its Working Group in this field, and in view of the foreseen accessibility of the optical disk system through the Internet and the efforts being made by the United Nations Development Programme to connect missions to the Internet, it does not seem necessary to develop separate proposals in this field.

Notes

1/ Official Records of the General Assembly, Fiftieth Session, Supplement No. 32 and addenda (A/50/32 and Add.1 and 2).

2/ Ibid., Supplement No. 7 (A/50/7), para. 79.

3/ E/1996/81.